



# “Trasmutabile per tutte guise:” Dante in the Comedy

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## ‘Trasmutabile per tutte guise’. Dante in the *Comedy*

*Lino Pertile*

Allow me to start *in medias res* by quoting an episode from the *Comedy*. Dante and Beatrice are in heaven, in the sphere of the Moon, and as Beatrice falls silent and ‘trasmuta sembiante’ (changes her appearance, *Par.* 5. 88),<sup>1</sup> Dante is so stunned by her beauty, that he has to refrain from asking several questions that have come to his mind. Meanwhile, speeding upward from the sphere of the Moon, they arrive on Mercury, and as Beatrice turns more radiant with joy, so does the planet shine brighter (94-96). At this point Dante exclaims: ‘And if even that star then changed and smiled, / what did I become who by my very nature / am subject to each and every kind of change?’

E se la stella si cambiò e rise,  
qual mi fec’io che pur da mia natura  
trasmutabile son per tutte guise! (97-99)<sup>2</sup>

In the following three *terzine*, Dante describes how the blessed souls of Mercury come towards him as fish in a clear and calm fishpond come to the surface if they see something they believe to be food. We are eager to hear what happens next, but, instead of proceeding immediately with the story, the poet teases us with these words: ‘Merely consider, reader, if what I here begin / went on no farther, how keen would be / your anguished craving to know more’:

Pensa, lettor, se quel che qui s’inizia  
non procedesse, come tu avresti  
di più sàvere angosciosa carizia. (109-111).

In a recent note published in the *EBDSA*, Antonio Soro has shown that if one reads backward the initials of the *incipits* of the last five *terzine*, starting from ‘Pensa lettor’ and ending with ‘E se la stella’ (the *terzina* where Dante writes that he is ‘trasmutabile per tutte guise’), the word one gets is ‘PESCE’.<sup>3</sup> What is especially pleasing (and teasing!) about this acrostic is that it comes to us from the bottom up, just as Dante’s blessed/fish come to

him. But there is more to it. I looked up ‘pesce’ in the *Tesoro della Lingua Italiana delle Origini*, and not surprisingly found that mobility and mutability were understood to be the defining characteristics of fish in the Due-Trecento, just as they are today. Two texts, both dated 1310 and both listing the qualities of humans, affirm that man is ‘mobile e convertibile come lo pesce’ (mobile and convertible like fish) and ‘mobile come pesce’ (mobile like fish).<sup>4</sup> Quite obviously, Dante is suggesting that he is ‘trasmutabile’ like a fish, and to hammer the point home he ‘engraves’ the acrostic PESCE into the text.

‘Trasmutabile’ means transmutable, impressionable, subject to change. It is possible that, through the hidden acrostic, Dante may want to communicate his affinity with the Mercurial souls who were active so that honor and fame might follow them (*Par.* 6. 113-14). After all, Dante was born under Gemini, and, according to the astrologers, Gemini is the ‘house’ of Mercury.<sup>5</sup> However, the charge of transmutability is not a light one. It implies an experience of the self as inconstant, uncertain, capricious, subject to the fluctuations of desire and to the changes of time and place – something very much like what Montaigne will say of himself, and of man in general, almost three centuries later.<sup>6</sup> How can Dante say such a thing of himself *in paradise*? Hasn’t the experience of inferno and purgatory ‘sorted him out’ for good? We are confused. Who is speaking here: Dante the character, the narrator, the author? And at what stage of his journey/life? And at the same time: are such distinctions helpful in this context, or even, do they make any sense?

One can ask a similar set of questions in *Purgatorio* 14 when Dante declines to reveal his name to Guido del Duca with the pretext that it is not well known yet. Guido and the other penitent souls are amazed to see that Dante is walking through purgatory alive, but Dante doesn’t seem to feel so special on account of it, for he says: ‘dirvi ch’i’ sia, saria parlare indarno, ché ’l nome mio ancor molto non suona’ (To tell you who I am would be to speak in vain, for my name as yet does not resound, *Purg.* 14. 20-21). Dante sounds modest, but it is false modesty, for his ‘*ancor molto non suona*’ inevitably implies that eventually his name will indeed achieve great fame.<sup>7</sup> But how can a character, who has just been through the terrace of the proud, make such a claim? The speaker can only be a ‘personaggio-poeta’<sup>8</sup> who at the time of the fictional journey is confident of his future glory because he has seen it. Character, narrator and author are all three simultaneously involved in this statement: it is an eminently autobiographical statement, which completely disregards the poem’s chronological assumptions.

In an article I published 15 years ago,<sup>9</sup> I considered some crucial chronological statements that Dante, or other characters, make in the *Comedy*, and came to some rather startling conclusions. Briefly, my argument went as follows. According to the *fictio* of the *Comedy*, Dante the character begins his journey entering inferno with Virgil on the evening of Good Friday of the year 1300, and he re-surfaces on the shore of the Mountain of Purgatory on the morning of Easter Sunday. Here, speaking to Cato, Virgil states that Dante, ‘through his folly’ came so close to spiritual death, that he, Virgil, had to be sent to deliver him:

Questi non vide mai l'ultima sera;  
ma per la sua follia le fu sì presso,  
che molto poco tempo a volger era.  
Sì com'io dissi, fui mandato ad esso  
per lui campare; e non li era altra via  
che questa per la quale i' mi son messo.

This man had yet to see his final evening;  
but, through his folly, little time was left  
before he did - he was so close to it.

As I have told you, I was sent to him  
for his deliverance; the only road  
I could have taken was the road I took. (*Purg.* 1. 58-63)

On the Tuesday after Easter, four days after his rescue, Dante reaches the sixth terrace of Purgatory. Here, among the gluttonous, he meets his old friend Forese Donati who died four years earlier, in 1296. Talking with him on that Tuesday, Dante recalls with regret a debauched period of his life, which started, he says, some years before 1296, and continued unabated until ‘l'altrier’ (the day before yesterday), when Virgil rescued him – actually four days earlier. The morning after, that is Wednesday after Easter, and seven cantos later, Beatrice fully confirms these chronological details (*Purg.* 30. 124-41). Dante, she says, went astray soon after her death in 1290, and was lost until she made arrangements for his rescue a few days before.

All this is clear and consistent. So we assume that Dante wants us to think that the 1290s were a decade of moral dissipation for him, a long period of *traviamento*, as at least a part of it is traditionally called, that drove the poet to the dark forest of *Inferno* 1. Yet during his exchange with Forese, Dante is approached by another ‘goloso’, the poet Bonagiunta da Lucca, who asks him if he truly is the poet Dante, ‘colui che fore / trasse le nove

rime, cominciando / “*Donne ch’avete intelletto d’amore*”. And Dante replies famously:

‘I mi son un che, quando  
Amor mi spira, noto, e a quel modo  
ch’e’ ditta dentro, vo significando.’ (49-54)

‘I am one who, when Love  
inspires me, take note and, as he dictates  
deep within me, so I set forth.’

This supremely self-confident, serene statement is surprising, to say the least, coming as it does from the mouth of one who has just been saved from spiritual ruin. How could Dante say this to Bonagiunta and, virtually in the same breath, recognize his unspeakable ‘traviamento’ to Forese? If the love Dante mentions today, Tuesday, is pure, how could he have found himself in the dark forest last Friday, four days ago?

There is here an inconsistency which, fifteen years ago, I found troubling, and still troubles me today. For, if we take Dante’s chronology seriously, we have two options: either Dante contradicts himself in a fundamental way, or the notion of *stilnovo* which he puts forward in the Bonagiunta episode is not, after all, as positive as it sounds. Fifteen years ago, I took the latter option suggesting that we should not read as entirely positive Dante’s assessment of the *stilnovo*. To quote myself: ‘The *stilnovo* as a “dottrina d’amore” was vague enough to coexist with the moral dissipation alluded to in the Forese episode; it was an aesthetics that, potentially, could be turned to good, but in effect was inadequate in preventing Dante’s slide towards moral ruin’.<sup>10</sup>

Technically speaking, my reasoning was correct, but it was based on the assumption that the distinction between Dante the character and Dante the narrator applies consistently throughout the poem.<sup>11</sup> After fifteen years, my understanding of this issue has changed somewhat, and the distinction between character and narrator no longer seems as clear-cut as it was then. This is the topic that I’m proposing to address briefly in my paper today. My purpose is not to offer alternatives, but to ask questions, articulate doubts, and make a few tentative suggestions.

2. Over the last fifty years or so, the distinction between the two Dantes – the narrator and the character – has become enshrined in the critical

discourse about the *Comedy*.<sup>12</sup> To these two Dantes, some critics add a third – Dante the author or the man – who is responsible for every word the other two say and every move they make.<sup>13</sup> According to this distinction, the author Dante Alighieri is the only actual person involved in the operation, whereas both the character Dante and the narrator Dante are characters created by him. Most importantly, the standard narratological distinction that normally applies to all first person narratives is made here as well. In the story narrated in the poem (the *fabula*), the character becomes the narrator only after completing his journey; whereas from the perspective of the actual poem (the *sjuzhet*), character and narrator coexist, but the narrator knows everything about the journey from its very inception, while the character needs to progress through the journey in order to acquire the same understanding of himself and of the world as the narrator. Or at least this is what we are told.<sup>14</sup>

This distinction aims to prove that Dante the character grows, both psychologically and morally, all through the journey; in particular, it is brought out in order to argue that, if any conflict arises between the character's apparent feelings and the manifestations of God's justice witnessed by him, such a conflict is due to, and should be treated as evidence of, the still unreformed, sinful and weak spirit of the character himself. Accordingly, Dante the narrator is, from the very beginning of the journey, well beyond this condition, though he relives it as character every time we read the poem in the order in which it was structured. Any inconsistency we may find in it does not reflect Dante's true feelings and attitudes, but the poet's narrative strategy, which aims to implicitly reveal the character's failings. For instance, the obvious sympathy for Francesca, Brunetto, or Ulysses that seems to affect the character Dante, is not an emotion that the narrator shares, but a sign of the character's weakness at the time of the journey before types of sin towards which he feels, thinking of his experience, understanding or sympathy.

Undoubtedly, this is an appealing way of looking at the poem, but there is less evidence to support it than this abstract account at first leads us to imagine. During the weeklong journey, the character Dante does *not* change, except superficially and temporarily as required by the circumstances in which he happens to find himself. He may show joy and sadness, pity and cruelty, curiosity, fear and rage, but these are passing feelings and emotions, which attest to his 'transmutability' but do not transform him in any permanent way. In fact, there is no evidence that the character Dante of *Par.* 33, that is to say the Dante of Thursday after Easter 1300, is fundamentally different – spiritually stronger, intellectually more

mature, morally more upright – than the Dante of *Inf.* 1, that is, of the previous Good Friday. To give just one example: in *Inf.* 5 Dante is moved by Francesca's story to the point of swooning; in *Purg.* 5. 6-18 he is distracted so much by the sight of the negligent souls looking at his shadow, that Virgil rebukes him exhorting him to be like a tower that does not shake in the blowing winds; in *Par.* 5, he declares himself to be as transmutable as a fish. So where is the change? Has Dante learned anything? Isn't he as uncertain and subject to change now as he was at the beginning of the journey?

However, there is undeniably a chronology that affects the character Dante in the story he narrates, and there is a turning point, a before and an after, that separates and distinguishes two very different stages of his life; what is unusual is that this turning point is not placed in the middle or at the end of the story, but at its very beginning, where Dante is rescued by Virgil. This is the point of Dante's 'conversion'; once he is over that point, Dante still needs to consolidate his new spiritual state, but he does not need to change anymore: in spite of some apparent 'conversions', the following journey is all in one direction.<sup>15</sup>

It is true that, when Dante and Virgil reach the top of the Mountain of Purgatory, five days into their journey, Virgil pronounces Dante's will at last 'free, strait, and whole' ('libero, dritto e sano è tuo arbitrio', *Purg.* 27. 141). Virgil's speech sounds solemn and definitive; the experience so far is supposed to have so transformed Dante that he no longer needs Virgil's guidance in order to go forward. However, is Dante's transformation actually visible in the way the character thinks, speaks and behaves? Has a process of this kind actually been *shown* to take place in the course of the journey? What signs of internal growth does the character display? Why does he need to go through Beatrice's humiliating inquisition if he is already a reformed character? Does the narrator, i.e. the supposedly 'new' Dante, whose voice interjects so often in the text, ever say anything about his *former* self? Does he ever make any comment, as, say, Manzoni does with Renzo, when this former Dante seems to misbehave, or when he appears to harbor the 'wrong' feelings, or to react in questionable ways to the situations he encounters?

The anger and contempt for Filippo Argenti that Dante demonstrates among the wrathful, far from being in any way questioned, is immediately approved by Virgil (*Inf.* 8. 31-63), and nowhere is Dante's premeditated violence against Bocca degli Abati (*Inf.* 32. 73-123) denounced or condemned. It is true that Virgil scolds him when he indulges in watching the squabble between Master Adam and Sinon (*Inf.* 30.130-32), but earlier, in the bolgia of the barrators, Dante is portrayed as having much more

common sense than Virgil (*Inf.* 21. 127-29). So where is the progress? In the case of Geri del Bello, Dante the character shows greater pity than Virgil allows, and he explains why his pity is justified treating Virgil's advice to him as misconceived (*Inf.* 29. 1-30). In terms of political thinking, the character Dante appears fully and, as it were, *correctly* formed from the very beginning of the story. The decline of Florentine politics and public morality pictured by Cacciaguida in the sphere of Mars (*Paradiso* 16) endorses what Dante had openly stated upon meeting the three noble Florentines in the seventh circle of hell (*Inf.* 16. 73-75). Similarly, Cacciaguida confirms and strengthens Brunetto's approval of Dante's contempt for Florence, and Saint Peter's invective in the sphere of the Fixed Stars (*Paradiso* 27) sanctions Dante's attack on the simoniac popes in the third bolgia (*Inferno* 19). Even poetically, by confirming in *Purg.* 24 the continuity between *Donne ch'avete intelletto d'amore* and his current poetics, Dante implies that, though he may be climbing the mountain of purgation, he has nothing to learn, since he is already perfectly able to follow Love's dictation.

Conversely, far from giving signs that the character Dante needs reforming, there are many occasions in which Dante the narrator explicitly insists on the absolute identity of author, character, and narrator. What seems to drive the historical Dante in the pursuit of this autobiographical wholeness is his desire to vindicate the justness of his religious, moral, philosophical, and poetical stance. The Dante who in 1302, rather than submit chooses exile; who in 1304 parts company with his own allies and chooses to go his way alone; who in 1311 warns the Florentines to open their city gates to Henri VII or else, and who in 1315, rather than yield even slightly, remains uncompromisingly in exile; who a few years later imagines an empty throne in heaven waiting for Henry VII to come and fill it: this Dante does not admit to any fault through his fictional *alter ego*. He may openly confess to being as transmutable as every man is, but that does not mean that he is prepared to publicly recognize any significant mistake, past or present, on his part. In fact he deploys his fictional persona in order to demonstrate that he, the real Dante, is right, and all others, men and institutions alike – Florence, the Church, Cardinals and Popes, Empire, Kings, Lords, peoples, scholars and poets of Italy – are wrong or at least misguided. In sum, far from requiring a separation of the real and the fictional Dante, the poem demands that we see a seamless continuity between the two functions.

In the Epistle to Cangrande, Dante states that the subject of the *Comedy* is the *status animarum post mortem* ('the state of souls after death', *Ep.* 13. 24). Some scholars have been so disappointed by this statement that



they refuse to accept that it can be by Dante. They cannot accept a description of the poem that does not account for the autobiographic and autodiegetic part of it. However, the reason for this ‘failure’ seems simple to me: while identifying completely with what we call Dante the character, Dante does not consider himself to be the subject of the journey, but the recorder of it – the paper, tape or film, if I may say so, upon which the matter of the future poem is gradually impressed (‘o mente che scrivesti ciò ch’io vidi’, ‘o memory, that set down what I saw’, *Inf.* 2. 8). In other words, for Dante, the subject of the poem is what he has seen, not his role as seer. To observe is indeed the solemn task with which, from inside the poem, Beatrice, Cacciaguida and Saint Peter charge the poet: to observe in order to tell what he sees for the benefit of the world that lives so badly (*Purg.* 32. 103).

3. What was then the *folia*, of which Virgil speaks to Cato, the madness of just a few days ago, that almost cost Dante his life, and forced him to take another path (‘tenere altra via’, *Inf.* 1. 91) out of the dark forest? And how are we to reconcile such madness with the present sanity?

To answer this question, we need to focus on a second strand that is present in the poem, one in which Dante the character *does* indeed recognize his wrongdoing and portray himself as repentant. As is well known, this recognition comes on two main occasions, both in *Purgatorio*: on the terrace of the gluttonous, when Dante meets Forese, and later, in earthly paradise, when he meets Beatrice.

On the terrace of the gluttonous, Dante identifies himself to his old friend Forese by referring to the shameful life the two led together before Forese died in 1296 – a life from which Virgil rescued him only ‘l’altr’ier’ – the other day:

Per ch’io a lui: «Se tu riduci a mente  
qual fosti meco, e qual io teco fui,  
ancor fia grave il memorar presente.  
Di quella vita mi volse costui  
che mi va innanzi, l’altr’ier, quando tonda  
vi si mostrò la suora di colui» (*Purg.* 23. 118-23)

At this I said to him: ‘If you should call  
to mind what you have been with me and I  
with you, remembering now will still be heavy.

He who precedes me turned me from that life  
some days ago [the other day], when she who is the sister  
of him’ - I pointed to the sun - ‘was showing

her roundness to you.'

Though vague and lacking in detail, this amounts nevertheless to a confession of guilt. Dante gives us to understand that such a dissolute period of his life lasted for a long time and continued unabated, beyond Forese's death, until the time of his own 'conversion', four days ago, when Virgil rescued him from the forest to take him – he says explicitly (*Purg.* 23. 127-29) – to Beatrice.

This story of Dante's 'traviamento' is told once more by Beatrice the morning after, when Dante is about to cross the river Lethe. Now however we are given more details:

Quando di carne a spirto era salita  
e bellezza e virtù cresciuta m'era,  
fu' io a lui men cara e men gradita;  
e volse i passi suoi per via non vera,  
imagini di ben seguendo false,  
che nulla promession rendono intera.

Né l'impetrare ispirazion mi valse,  
con le quali e in sogno e altrimenti  
lo rivocai; sì poco a lui ne calse!

Tanto giù cadde, che tutti argomenti  
a la salute sua eran già corti,  
fuor che mostrarli le perdute genti.

Per questo visitai l'uscio d'i morti  
e a colui che l'ha qua sù condotto,  
li prieghi miei, piangendo, furon porti. (*Purg.* 30. 127-141)

when, from flesh to spirit, I  
had risen, and my goodness and my beauty  
had grown, I was less dear to him, less welcome:

he turned his footsteps toward an untrue path;  
he followed counterfeits of goodness, which  
will never pay in full what they have promised.

Nor did the inspirations I received-  
with which, in dream and otherwise, I called  
him back-help me; he paid so little heed!

He fell so far [down] there were no other means  
to lead him to salvation, except this:  
to let him see the people who were lost.

For this I visited the gateway of  
the dead; to him who guided him above  
my prayers were offered even as I wept.

Beatrice states that, after she died in 1290, Dante, turning away from her, sunk so low into dissoluteness that he was almost beyond salvation – a condition which I believe was already adumbrated in Dante's dream of the siren.<sup>16</sup> The only remedy was to expose him to the sight of the lost souls of inferno. For this reason Beatrice visited Limbo and asked Virgil to guide Dante on the journey that in five days brought him here, to earthly paradise. Now however, before he is allowed any farther, Dante must confess, and weep for his sins. Though Virgil has just pronounced him free and whole, he must prove that he has repented.

It seems reasonable to assume that the two indictments, by Forese and Beatrice, point to the same period of moral straying, which Dante experienced roughly from the death of Beatrice in 1290 to the beginning of his fictional journey ten years later. But what was the nature of this straying? Umberto Bosco defines it as a deviation of a philosophical and religious nature.<sup>17</sup> Later the same critic admits that a moral component must have been present, too. Generally speaking, scholars tend to resist the notion that Dante's straying could have been even partly moral, let alone just erotic and sentimental. And yet, as we have seen, the poem affirms implicitly Dante's correctness in his practice as citizen of Florence, political militant and thinker, Christian soul, intellectual, and poet: it concedes no 'traviamento' whatsoever in the sphere of public life.<sup>18</sup> The only area in which Dante openly confesses and wants us to imagine some major indiscretion is his private life, and in particular his relation to Beatrice – what she calls 'o pargoletta o altra novità con sì breve uso' (a young girl or other such novelty of brief use). Interestingly, this is also the only strand in the narrative in which Dante the character is shown to grow, make progress, and achieve change.

Therefore it seems possible to distinguish, albeit intertwined throughout the poem, two major narrative lines: the private theme of Dante's return to Beatrice after ten years' of guilty straying, and the public theme of Dante's encounter with the dead, where the views he publicly held in his life are debated but ultimately endorsed and given authority. The story of Dante's return to Beatrice frames and includes, yet remains somewhat separate from, the countless stories, unrelated to Dante but told to him by the dead. Behind this shadowy separation, I suggest that we may catch perhaps a glimpse of the genesis of the *Comedy* as we have it.

4. Before moving on to this final point, I must address an important objection. There is a moment during their meeting in earthly paradise, when Beatrice is said to charge Dante with specifically *intellectual*, rather than merely moral, straying. Let's examine the relevant passage. Having just witnessed the trials of the chariot, Dante is perplexed and in need of Beatrice's words in order to understand the meaning of what he has seen. So Beatrice speaks at length about the allegorical spectacle, but, though her words are completely clear, Dante is unable to understand what they mean. Then he asks:

‘Ma perché tanto sovra mia veduta  
vostra parola disiata vola,  
che più la perde quanto più s’aiuta?’  
‘Perché conoschi’ disse ‘quella scuola  
c’hai seguitata, e veggì sua dottrina  
come può seguitar la mia parola;  
e veggì vostra via da la divina  
distar cotanto, quanto si discorda  
da terra il ciel che più festina’. (*Purg.* 33. 82-90)

‘But why is it that Your longed-for words  
soar up so far beyond my sight  
the more it strives the more it cannot reach them?’  
‘So that you may come to understand’, she said,  
‘the school that you have followed  
and see if what it teaches follows well my words,  
and see that your way is as far from God’s  
as that highest heaven, which spins the fastest,  
is distant from the earth’.

Umberto Bosco captures well the general understanding of this exchange. He sees in it ‘un accenno diretto ed esplicito alla natura intellettuale del traviamiento’ di Dante (a direct and explicit allusion to the intellectual nature of Dante’s straying); for him, Dante confesses here to having abandoned theology (Beatrice) in favour of philosophy (the Donna gentile). ‘La colpa di Dante non è dunque solo morale – he concludes –; consiste anche nell’aver seguito una scuola, una via che non possono condurre alle supreme verità’ (Dante’s fault is not just moral; it consists also in having followed a school, a way that cannot lead to the supreme truths).<sup>19</sup> Some critics go as far as viewing this exchange as Dante’s not-so-implicit denunciation of his youthful Averroism, or more specifically as a recantation on his affair with Lady Philosophy in the *Convivio*.<sup>20</sup> This is an over-reading of Dante’s text which, in my opinion, should be resisted.

There is no doubt that here Beatrice is teaching Dante an important, albeit obvious, lesson, but it is equally unquestionable, in my view, that her words, tone, and style are different from those she used earlier, in cantos 30-31, when she accused Dante of having betrayed her. It should not be forgotten that, by the time he crosses the river Lethe and joins Beatrice (canto 31), Dante has confessed his sins, has been forgiven and is no longer *guilty* of anything. Accordingly, Beatrice's tone is firmly didactic, but not condemnatory, for there is nothing left to condemn. What she says is not that Dante is wrong, but that all the knowledge he has accumulated thus far is inadequate for him to comprehend her words, which is quite a different thing. This is not a new notion. As we will see in a moment, the inadequacy of human intelligence is a *tópos* not only of *Paradiso*,<sup>21</sup> but also of *Purgatorio*, where it is often found on Virgil's lips. Of course, the implication in Beatrice's discourse is also that Dante had less faith than he should have had, but isn't that the root of the whole story? Why else was he so close to spiritual death, if not because he lacked faith?

Though much ink has been spilled speculating on the identity of the 'scuola' alluded to by Beatrice, no attention has been paid to the simple fact that, from the beginning of the poem, the school that Dante follows is Virgil's,<sup>22</sup> and Virgil is shown to be poignantly conscious of the limits of his teaching. Indeed, what Beatrice now says can be seen as the culmination of a series of statements which Virgil makes throughout *Purgatorio*. Already in *Purg.* 3. 34-45, Virgil acknowledges the foolishness of those who hope to follow and understand God's 'infinita via'<sup>23</sup> by means of 'nostra ragione' – something, he adds, that many great philosophers, such as Aristotle, Plato and others, fruitlessly attempted to do (and here, seemingly perturbed, he lowers his head). At *Purg.* 6, replying to Dante's question about the efficacy of the penitents' prayers, Virgil defers to Beatrice describing her as the one 'who shall be light between the truth and intellect' (6. 45). Similarly, at *Purg.* 15. 76-78, he attempts twice to explain Guido del Duca's discourse on charity, but in the end he says that only Beatrice will be able to satisfy Dante's intellectual hunger. Again at *Purg.* 18. 46-48, as he is expounding on the nature of love, he declares that he can tell Dante only 'as far as reason can see', adding that 'to go farther [Dante] must look to Beatrice, for it depends on faith alone'. Finally, and most tellingly, at *Purg.* 21. 31-33, Virgil describes to Statius his limited role as Dante's guide,<sup>24</sup> and the word he uses for that role is 'scola', the same word Beatrice uses in the passage we started from:

'Ond'io fui tratto fuor de l'ampia gola

d'inferno per mostrarli, e mosterolli  
oltre, quanto il potrà menar mia scola'.

'I, for this reason, was drawn from hell's wide jaws  
to be his guide, and I shall guide him  
as far as my teaching will allow'.

So it is hardly surprising to find that, at the end of *Purgatorio*, a Dante 'schooled' by Virgil is unable to follow Beatrice. I'm not suggesting that the school Beatrice alludes to is exclusively Virgil's, even if Virgil is certainly implicated in her allusion; it is obviously every school that relies on reason rather than faith. After all, by being confined to Limbo, Virgil is the poem's proof that the *philosophica documenta* are earthbound; that they are inadequate to provide access to heaven and its bliss.<sup>25</sup> This however is not just Virgil's limitation; it is a limitation intrinsic to the human condition, to what Beatrice calls 'vostra via', as opposed to the 'divina'.

The bird metaphor that underlies the passage fully supports this reading. Dante says that Beatrice's word is like a bird, which he longs to reach, but it flies so far beyond his sight that the more he strives to follow it the more it escapes him.<sup>26</sup> Like Bonagiunta, Dante feels earthbound, unable to follow the bird of his desire as it soars higher and higher.<sup>27</sup> Beatrice's response extends Dante's metaphor and brings out its implications. This is happening, she says, so that Dante will realize what kind of school he has followed, and understand how inadequate its teachings are to the task of following her word. The metaphor of Beatrice's high flying word in relation to an earthbound poet is finally replaced by that of the highest celestial body in relation to earth: the earthly way ('vostra via'), Beatrice says, is as different from the divine, as earth is from the fastest heaven. Here the intellectual inadequacy is no longer Dante's (or Virgil's) alone; it is a given of human nature, something as real and insuperable as the distance separating a still earth from the extreme reaches of the universe, where the Primum Mobile spins the fastest.

To conclude: the passage I have examined is not an indictment of Dante's intellectual transgression, but a statement on his unpreparedness for the task ahead. As she takes over from Virgil, Beatrice stresses both the limits of all earthly, including Virgil's, teaching and the heavenly scope of her own – a new and more challenging school, to which Dante will have to rise in *Paradiso*.

5. Let's now go back to the poem's two narrative lines I mentioned earlier, the private and the public. As we have seen, though Dante's autobiographical allusions in the *Comedy* go back to ten years before the journey, in the actual poem Dante the character lives only the last week of those ten years. It's only the last few days, from the evening of Good Friday to the Wednesday morning after Easter, that have brought about Dante's conversion and return to Beatrice. His awakening in the forest at the end of a decade of dissipation was not due to a deliberate act of his will but to the intervention of an external power – a freely given grace, *gratia gratis data*. This grace was not enough by itself to save Dante. In order to recognize and renounce his folly, he needed to go on a journey that would take him back to Beatrice, the love of his youth. In this scheme, Beatrice is the focus of Dante's journey, which consists of Dante's progressive elevation to her; she is both its motivator and its destination.

In its original conception, back in the early 1290s, the poem must have consisted of a visit to Beatrice in heaven, i.e. an apotheosis of the poet's lady, its aim being to continue and complete the *Vita Nova* in order to 'dire di lei quello che mai non fue detto d'alcuna' (to write of her that which was never written of any woman). In such a plan, inverting the model of Orpheus and Eurydice, the dead Beatrice rescues Dante by drawing him up to heaven – an idea for which one can already find some anticipations in the *Vita Nova*.<sup>28</sup> What I am suggesting is that the poem might originally have been conceived as a Christian romance, the story of Dante's journey to the blessed Beatrice. But allow me to speculate a little further: why and when did Dante turn the initial Beatrician project into the poem he actually wrote?

We know that Dante was not able to go ahead with his plan to honor Beatrice in the 1290s; or at least, we do not have anything by him that looks like a first draft of a major poem for Beatrice written in the second half of the 1290s. Giovanni Boccaccio tells in great details that Dante wrote the first seven cantos of *Inferno* before being exiled, and that he resumed this work only in 1306 when the seven cantos, which he thought had been destroyed, were returned to him in Lunigiana, where he was staying with his friend Moroello Malaspina.<sup>29</sup> Though Boccaccio himself does not believe that Dante, as he does in *Inf.* 6, could prophesy his own exile before it actually happened, there may be a kernel of truth in this story. Dante may well have started in the mid 1290s a work of poetry, a 'poema paradisiaco', that eventually became the *Comedy*.<sup>30</sup>

If he wrote anything before the summer of 1304, whatever it was, it could hardly have been the poem we read now. And this not because his involvement in Florentine affairs kept him away from the poem until he was

out of politics and well into exile, but because he needed his public experience and the experience of exile to begin to conceive the poem we read now. It's only in the void left by the loss of both Florence and Beatrice that the poem could arise. In fact, the exiled Dante first tried his hand as a public intellectual with works that would not undermine his chances of returning home. *De vulgari eloquentia* and *Convivio* were probably his attempts to write 'public' works capable of proving his stature as an intellectual without creating himself more enemies. But it was only when he lost all hope of returning to Florence that the way was open for him to write about Florence.

At that point, however, the poem could no longer be just a romance for Beatrice. In the previous ten years the Beatrice of the *Vita Nova* had grown along with Dante, and the poem that he had originally conceived in order to sing her praises had become a poem 'in pro del mondo che mal vive.' (to serve the world that lives so ill, *Purg.* 32. 103).

Two new models superimposed themselves to the original Orphic one without obliterating it, one classical and one Christian: Aeneas' visit to the underworld, and Saint Paul's visit to the third heaven. These new models extend, complicate, and change the nature of Dante's original project from private and romantic to public and prophetic. Dante promotes himself from poet to prophet, and Beatrice from romantic ideal to God's angel and chief theologian.

Let's not underestimate the enormity of this change. The 'panorama of the common and multiplex world of human reality' is suddenly laid open, writes Eric Auerbach.<sup>31</sup> What was private becomes public, and the public becomes 'narratable'. The sense of surreal, closed interiority that characterized the *Vita Nova*, is blown open and transformed through a total engagement with the real world. The originally simple, unified story line becomes manifold. As Dante goes along his way in search of the lost Beatrice, new characters appear, and the poem acquires new meanings. Out of the romance, an epic Christian vision germinates and takes shape. Beatrice not only fulfils the potential she had in the *Vita Nova*; she grows beyond herself, she becomes herself a multifaceted symbol – lover, angel, mother, teacher, theologian – but becomes as well a force that holds the poem together. The 'comedia' of Dante's return to Beatrice brings constantly back to unity a multiple subject-matter that, at every step, threatens to disintegrate into fragments, in the dozens of different stories created by Dante's prodigious imagination. In the end the original myth of Dante and Beatrice provides a romantic frame within which Dante sets the story of his journey to the otherworld. This, I suggest, explains why Dante



changes in relation to Beatrice, while essentially remaining the same, albeit 'trasmutabile', in every other respect. Unlike his journey to Beatrice, his exploration of the world of the dead is not there to prove his regeneration, but the degeneration of the world that rejected him.

I started this paper questioning the applicability to Dante's *Comedy* of some recent narratological notions such as character, narrator, and author. Even if, technically speaking, it seems possible to distinguish these three functions in the poem, the question I'm asking is whether, by systematically doing so, we don't go too far in the direction of the novel. By perceiving Dante's great poem as a novel, we paradoxically defuse, and fail to engage with, that explosive charge that is fundamental to Dante's conception of his poem: his personal involvement in the proceedings, or if we want to call it so, his autobiographical claim.

The other element which inevitably gets lost in the triangular negotiations between character, narrator and author is the one we started with: Dante's transmutability. I have shown how often Dante attests, in both words and deed, to this weakness. I would like to conclude by presenting two more passages in which Dante refers to transmutability not just as his personal fault, but as a common flaw of human nature.

The first passage can be found in *De vulgari eloquentia*. The context is Dante's discussion of 'the process of change by which one and the same language became many'. The only reason, apart from Babel, Dante gives for the fact that, within one country, region, and even city, so many varieties of speech occur, is that 'human beings are highly unstable and variable animals'.<sup>32</sup> He does not elaborate or comment on this statement; he gives it as though it were a self-evident truth, shared by everyone.

The second passage occurs, remarkably, in Saint Bernard's prayer to the Virgin Mary in the last canto of *Paradiso*, arguably the most dramatic and intense moment in the whole *Comedy*. At the end of his prayer, Saint Bernard asks that the Virgin preserve Dante's affections sound and healthy after the supreme vision that he is about to experience. He continues: 'Vinca tua guardia i movimenti umani' (*Par.* 33. 37). Whether Bernard is praying for Dante to remain pure *after* he returns to earth or, as I have argued elsewhere,<sup>33</sup> to remain sane and whole *during* the imminent, potentially shattering vision of the Godhead, these 'movimenti umani' are precisely the changing feelings, emotions, desires and impulses that make us so transmutable or, in the words of the *De vulgari*, so 'highly unstable and variable'. As far as I know, this concern has not attracted much critical attention, and yet it is a notion that is very close to a modern understanding

of the fragility and instability of man. Petrarch is usually seen as, before Montaigne, expressing this notion and handing it down to posterity.<sup>34</sup> Is it possible that even in this Dante preceded him?

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise specified, translations from the *Divine Comedy* are by Robert Hollander and Jean Hollander: see Dante, *A Verse Translation by Robert and Jean Hollander*, New York: Anchor Books: *Purgatorio*, 2004, and *Paradiso*, 2008). I would like to thank Robert Hollander for his helpful response to a first draft of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Marina De Fazio argues that transmutability is the theme of the whole canto: see her 'Paradiso V', *Lectura Dantis. A forum for Dante research and interpretation*, 16-17 (1995): special issue *Dante's 'Divine Comedy.'* *Introductory Readings. III: Paradiso*, ed. T. Wlassics, pp. 68-90.

<sup>3</sup> Antonio Soro, '“PESCE” in *Par. V*, 97-109', *Electronic Bulletin of the Dante Society of America*, 16 February 2009, < <http://www.princeton.edu/~dante/ebdsa/>>.

<sup>4</sup> The two quotes are from, respectively, the anonymous *Microzibaldone pisano* and Zuccherò Bencivenni's *Trattato della fisionomia del Maestro Aldobrandino*: see *Tesoro della Lingua Italiana delle Origini*, at <http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/efts/ARTFL/projects/OVI/philo3/ovi.search.html> under 'pesce'.

<sup>5</sup> See John S. Carroll, *In Patria: an Exposition of Dante's Paradiso*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, [1911], pp. 99-100.

<sup>6</sup> E.g. *Essays*, I, 1: 'Truly man is a marvelously vain, diverse, and undulating object. It is hard to found any constant and uniform judgment on him', in *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, tr. by Donald M. Frame, Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1965.

<sup>7</sup> In his note on these two lines Robert Hollander rightly remarks: 'Dante's modesty here is gainsaid by his previous inclusion among the great poets of all time in *Inferno* IV.100-102'. I would add that Dante manages to get around his modesty in *Purg.* 24. 49-63 by having Bonagiunta recognize him, in 1300, as the already famous initiator of the 'nove rime'.

<sup>8</sup> Gianfranco Contini's notion seems particularly apposite in this instance: see his 'Dante come personaggio-poeta della *Commedia*', in G. Contini, *Un'idea di Dante. Saggi danteschi*, Torino: Einaudi, 1976<sup>2</sup>, pp. 33-62.

<sup>9</sup> Lino Pertile, 'Dante's *Comedy* beyond the *Stilnovo*', *Lectura Dantis. A forum for Dante research and interpretation*, 13 (1993), 47-77.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>11</sup> Discussing my article a few years after it appeared, Robert Hollander writes that my 'good rationalist's point simply must yield in the face of poetic necessity': see Hollander, 'Dante's "Dolce Stil Novo" and the *Comedy*', in *Dante mito e poesia. Atti del secondo Seminario dantesco internazionale (Monte Verità, Ascona, 23-27 giugno 1997)*, ed. by Michelangelo Picone & Tatiana Crivelli, Florence: Cesati, 1999, pp. 263-81 (p. 278). Hollander does not believe that the character-narrator distinction applies consistently in the poem: for him, 'the theological nature of Dante's "new style"' frees the poet and us 'from the "historical" argument' (p. 270).

<sup>12</sup> For a full discussion of this distinction with bibliographical details, see Vittorio Russo, *Il romanzo teologico. Sondaggi sulla Commedia di Dante*, Napoli, Liguori, 1984, pp. 14-53.

<sup>13</sup> See Michelangelo Picone, 'Leggere la *Commedia* di Dante', in *Lectura Dantis Turicensis: Inferno*, ed. by Georges Güntert & Michelangelo Picone, Firenze: Cesati, 2000, pp. 13-25; for a discussion of this notion see Giuseppe Ledda, *La guerra della lingua. Ineffabilità, retorica e narrativa nella 'Commedia' di Dante*, Ravenna: Longo, 2002, pp. 13-17.

<sup>14</sup> For instance, in John Freccero's elegant essay 'The Prologue Scene', in John Freccero, *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, ed. by Rachel Jacoff, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1986, pp. 1-28 (p. 25).

- <sup>15</sup> I'm not convinced by Charles Singleton's influential theory of Dante's three distinct 'conversions' (Virgil, Beatrice, and Saint Bernard): see Charles Singleton, *Journey to Beatrice*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1958, pp. 39-68. Freccero describes Dante's story 'as a movement forward in time that is simultaneously a recapitulation'. I find this description compelling, but I'm perplexed when he adds that 'Dante thinks of this movement as a series of conversions', *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, p. 265.
- <sup>16</sup> See Lino Pertile, 'Il cigno e la sirena. Lettura di *Purgatorio* XIX', in *Esperimenti danteschi. Purgatorio*, forthcoming.
- <sup>17</sup> In his introduction to the Ulysses canto, Bosco describes it as 'una deviazione dall'ortodossia religiosa per effetto degli studi di filosofia intrapresi: dunque un travalicare i confini delle umane possibilità di conoscenza', in *La divina commedia: Inferno*, ed. by U. Bosco & G. Reggio, Florence: Le Monnier, 1979, p. 380.
- <sup>18</sup> As far as I know, Franco Ferrucci is the only scholar who makes a similar statement: see his 'Plenilunio sulla selva: il *Convivio*, le petrose, la *Commedia*', *Dante Studies* 119 (2001), 67-102 (p. 89); the article is now included in Franco Ferrucci, *Dante: lo stupore e l'ordine*, Napoli: Liguori, 2007 (see p. 93).
- <sup>19</sup> *Purgatorio*, p. 511, in *La divina commedia*, ed. Bosco-Reggio: 'tutta la *Commedia* potrebbe dirsi una grande contrita confessione di superbia intellettuale. Sul piano letterale della *Vita Nuova* Dante torna alla fedeltà alla memoria di Beatrice dopo il suo traviamiento da lei; sul piano allegorico, dalla filosofia dell'umano torna a quella del divino: si pensi che Beatrice, alla conclusione del libello, oltre che donna di questa terra, è già potenzialmente teologica esaltatrice della rivelazione, o comunque esponente di pura religiosità. Non diverso significato ha l'incontro con lei qui, nel Paradiso terrestre. Non par dunque ci sia alcun motivo per non ammettere che il traviamiento di cui Dante si confessa sia duplice: colpa d'infedeltà a se stesso, di vacillante fermezza morale; e insieme peccato intellettuale-religioso'. Already Manfredi Porena, in his commentary on *Purgatorio* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1968), writes of Dante's 'traviamiento intellettuale' (endnote 2, p. 327).
- <sup>20</sup> For a different view see J. A. Scott, 'Beatrice's reproaches in Eden: Which "School" had Dante followed?', *Dante Studies* 109 (1991), 1-23. While remaining skeptical over his view that what Beatrice alludes to is the 'Guelph school', I share Scott's critique of the standard reading of this passage.
- <sup>21</sup> See in particular: *Par.* 2. 56-57, 19. 49-57 and 79-81, 20. 130-35, 21. 91-96, and 33. 137-39.
- <sup>22</sup> 'maestro' is by far the most common title by which Dante addresses, or refers to, Virgil.
- <sup>23</sup> It is difficult not to hear in Beatrice's 'divina (via)' of *Purg.* 33. 88 an echo of this 'infinita via'.
- <sup>24</sup> It is intriguing to notice that Virgil's protestations of inadequacy are contradicted by Statius's praise of Virgil's role in his salvation in *Purg.* 22. 64-73.
- <sup>25</sup> See *De monarchia*, 3. 16. 7-10.
- <sup>26</sup> The metaphor is used again by Beatrice in *Par.* 2. 56-57: 'dietro ai sensi / vedi che la ragione ha corte l'ali'.
- <sup>27</sup> See L. Pertile, *La punta del disio. Semantica del desiderio nella Commedia*, Florence: Cadmo, 2005, pp. 85-113.
- <sup>28</sup> See Guglielmo Gorni, 'Beatrice agli Inferi', in *Omaggio a Beatrice (1290-1990)*, ed. by Rudy Abardo, Florence: Le Lettere, 1997, pp. 143-58, especially 153-56.
- <sup>29</sup> Giovanni Boccaccio, *Esposizioni sopra la Comedia*, ed. by Giorgio Padoan, Milan: Mondadori, 1965, canto VIII, (I), 5-13.
- <sup>30</sup> See Giorgio Padoan, *Il lungo cammino del poema sacro. Studi danteschi*, Florence: Olschki, 1993, in particular chapter 1, pp. 5-23; for Padoan's hypothesis of a 'poema paradisiaco' see p. 122. For a lucid discussion of the whole issue see Enrico Malato, *Dante*, Rome: Salerno, 1999, pp. 228-38.
- <sup>31</sup> E. Auerbach, *Mimesis. The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, tr. by Willard R. Trask, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968, p. 220.
- <sup>32</sup> 'homo [est] instabilissimum atque variabilissimum animal': *De vulgari eloquentia*, ed. and tr. by Steven Botterill, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, I.9.6, pp. 20-21.
- <sup>33</sup> See my *La punta del disio*, pp. 247-63.
- <sup>34</sup> For Petrarch see, just off the press, the excellent article by Unn Falkeid, 'Petrarch, Mont Ventoux and the Modern Self', *Forum Italicum*, 43 (2009), 5-28.